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Rebels in the Classroom: Creativity and Risk-Taking in Honors Pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

As teachers in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Honors College, we face semester after semester a familiar classroom scenario. There they are, our students, arranged around the room, eyeing us with some degree of suspicion mixed with a healthy amount of good will and desire to please. They want to do well; they want to work hard, but they also might be just a little bit bored, a little bit restless. They would love to try something new but are too afraid to do so. They grow terrified when pushed out of their comfort zones and faced with new challenges that might threaten their GPAs and hopes of medical or law school.

We find this grade obsession and risk-aversion frustrating, but we think we understand. Richard Badenhausem reminds us that many honors students have learned to define themselves by their ability to perform in a system that rewards them “for uncovering and then delivering ‘what the teacher wants’” (28). Removing the opportunity to meet well-defined academic expectations threatens students’ “self-esteem and self-image. Who am I if not the person who writes the best paper or earns the highest score in the class?” (Guzy 30). Repeatedly, honors students have been told they are models of excellence in an academic culture that relies on testing and emphasizes “rote learning,” so they are afraid to fall off the pedestal (Badenhausem 28). Exercising creativity and risk-taking demands that students challenge academic norms, standards, and sometimes individuals. Our students do not want to disappoint anyone, including themselves.

This student anxiety may only be intensified by well-meaning parents. William Deresiewicz, professor-turned-essayist, writes that students from “elite schools” have “been driven their whole lives by a fear of failure—often, in the first instance, by their parents’ fear of failure” (par. 19). Madeline Levine, a clinical psychologist, helps us to complicate this assertion. She argues that parents of high-achieving students are often eager to provide their children with opportunities and to shelter them “from either challenge or disappointment” (6). As a result, these parents expect good grades, reduce “family responsibilities,” and

“are typically in a frenzy of worry and overinvolvement” (6). Their children, who become “overly dependent on the opinions” of others, “aren’t particularly creative or interesting” (Levine 5, 6).

Carl Honoré also targets unprecedented parental over-involvement (4). While he believes that our culture’s celebrity-worship adversely influences many children along the social spectrum, “the burden falls most heavily on children higher up the social ladder, where the pressure to compete is more intense” (9). He states that this “modern approach to children is backfiring” (8), for today’s affluent, pampered children are suffering physically (both due to a sedentary lifestyle as well as to athletic overtraining) and mentally (“[d]epression . . . and stress-induced illnesses”).

Then the culture clash. These stressed-out students who are highly dependent on the approval of others enter our classrooms, and we want them “to think for themselves.” We want them to think and work outside the proverbial box, but they feel that their previous success has depended on their not doing so. How then can we blame them if they balk? When we consider how crippling these conflicting demands must be, it is difficult not to give in, not to bow to their silent exhortation, “Just let us do what we know how to do.”

At this specific historical moment, though, it has becoming increasingly obvious to us, their teachers, that we cannot afford to let them endlessly repeat familiar patterns. Humans have always lived in uncertain times, but the particular cast of our uncertainty in this second decade of the twenty-first century—forged by the forces of globalization and the resulting economic challenges—demands that we re-examine our teaching methods and that students add to their repertoire new ways of being students.

Our impression that teaching and learning need to change is hardly unique. In a 2009 *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Friedman argues that those who will keep and obtain jobs in these economically challenged times must have “the imagination to make themselves untouchables—to invent smarter ways to do old jobs.” Thus, his argument runs, our education system must not just teach “reading, writing, and arithmetic” but also “entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity.” Here at UNLV, in a city particularly hard hit by our nation’s economic woes, J. Patrick Coolican, a reporter for the *Las Vegas Sun* and *Las Vegas Weekly*, argues that “graduates who are educated—those who can think critically, clearly and creatively—will anticipate, adapt to and hopefully even exploit economic change” (56). Dean Paul Jarley, formerly of the UNLV Lee Business School, worries in a January 23, 2012, blog that universities do not “teach students to actually take risks in their professional lives.” He urges “college administrators [to] develop mechanisms that encourage faculty to engage in innovation and risk-taking in the pursuit of instilling these qualities in our students.” No doubt these words are welcome to many academic researchers who have been known to postpone exciting lines of inquiry that draw on multiple disciplines if they feel they will have a difficult time finding avenues for publication. If faculty members resist taking risks, how can they

encourage their students to do so? According to Deresiewicz, who argues that universities “develop one form of intelligence: the analytic,” forgoing “creative ability” (as well as “social intelligence and emotional intelligence”), our higher education system is creating a country of managers (par.6). An “elite” student who has not made time for reflection and is terrified of risk-taking “will soon be running a corporation or an institution or a government” with “great success but no vision” (par. 32). Similarly, Honoré cautions that “[a]t a time when the global economy is crying out for risk takers, we are teaching our children to play safe” (12). By forgoing creativity and the risks it involves, we risk shortchanging our children, our students, and ourselves.

These arguments that emphasize a link between creativity, risk-taking, and the economy resonate with academic research. While discussions of creativity have been most visible perhaps in a popular context (think self-help gurus and Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*), they have a history in various academic disciplines, especially psychology and education, but even in these fields such research is not “mainstream” (Sternberg 3). Weihua Niu says that “Creativity, as a continuing research area, has only a little over fifty years of history,” with J. P. Guilford’s 1950 presidential address to the American Psychological Association serving as a “catalyst” for this strain of inquiry (*International* 374).

Still, there is a body of scholarship that targets “creativity in education and industry” (Simonton 491). For example, Ruth Dineen and Weihua Niu, in a 2008 article on their work using “Western creative teaching methods” in China, argue that “[i]n order to deal with a globalized and technological future, societies have begun to focus on the importance of flexibility, acceptance of uncertainty, and the capacity to embrace change. These attributes are closely associated with creativity, increasingly seen as central to human adaptability” (par. 1). Sternberg points out that in Taiwan, for instance, “[t]here is a push to make the society and its people more creative” (4).

Teaching practices that encourage students “to embrace change” will prepare them to function in future economies. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the positive psychologist known to the world outside academia for his work on Flow, makes a similar case for creativity in his foreword to *Developing Creativity in Higher Education*. Creativity, he argues, will help citizens function in rapidly and constantly shifting “economic and social systems” (xvii). Consequently, he advocates an educational system that values creativity: “Young people have to learn how to relate and apply past ways of knowing to a constantly changing kaleidoscope of ideas and events. And that requires learning to be creative” (xix). The work of Ken Robinson supports this idea. In his 2009 *The Element*, he argues that “The world is changing faster than ever in our history. Our best hope for the future is to develop a new paradigm of human capacity to meet a new era of human existence. . . . We need to create environments—in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our public offices—where every person is inspired to grow creatively” (“Introduction”). We cannot abandon older ways of knowing, but we have to push ourselves and our students to build on these to develop new abilities and skills.

Consensus thus exists in both the popular and academic presses that we are living in the midst of a significant shift. The future is uncertain, but clearly we need to venture out from familiar terrain. Creativity, the conversation suggests, is the quality that will help us navigate these new lands, and educational institutions must somehow foster, develop, and value it. What is perhaps unclear is what creativity is and how to define it in an academic context. One challenge in providing a working definition is that not all cultures define creativity in the same way, as revealed in *The International Handbook of Creativity* edited by James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg. The authors of one essay in this collection, "Culture and Facets of Creativity," argue that, while creativity "is undoubtedly universally valued," "different forms and domains of creativity flourish in different cultures, which, in turn, shape the culture" (Misra 422). Norman Jackson's work encourages us to embrace and play with the many definitions of creativity while Sternberg offers a working definition of creativity we find useful: "Creativity involves thinking that is aimed at producing ideas or products that are relatively novel and that are, in some respect, compelling" (Sternberg 2). However, what compels us shifts over time. Our definitions of creativity alter with the changes in our lives and circumstances, which is perhaps why we are intrigued by how Hindi texts explore what motivates creativity: "The need for creation is located in the humans' needs to adjust to their environment" (Sternberg 9).

Certainly this sense that our "environment" is changing and that we need to adjust guides us as teachers. We work in a particular North American university at a particular historical moment when there is a general cry and demand for a certain type of creativity. While our student body is diverse, we all participate in the broader U.S. culture, so the trick is to find a way to balance the dominant tradition with the different values that inform our definitions of creativity.

As college teachers, we also continue to confront our own timidity, our fear of risks. We have had to ask when, in lip service to academic rigor, we are just taking the safe way out. We worry that at times, while admonishing students to think for themselves, come up with new ideas, and take intellectual risks, we have failed both in the design of our assignments and in our assessment methods to allow them to follow through. Consequently, over the past few years, the two of us have experimented, played, and tried to push ourselves out of our comfort zones. We have struggled to challenge ourselves and our students in new ways.

In the following two sections, presented in our two voices, we discuss our attempts to encourage honors college students to take risks and to engage with course material in creative ways that develop their critical thinking. Kate Wintrol discusses her struggles in an introductory survey course to design creative assignments that encourage critical thinking while Maria Jerinic analyzes her efforts in an upper-level seminar to encourage students to produce creative products that deviate from standard academic research assignments. We do not

present these discussions in a spirit of mastery. We do not pretend to have the final word on how to create assignments that encourage intellectual risk and creativity. What inspires us is the conviction that we should push ourselves to try and then talk about it and try again.

In addition, we offer our experiences in response to the fraught public conversation surrounding the nature of U.S. education at all levels. As we write, new battles are being fought over student and teacher assessment. Our struggles convince us that our education system will not serve our students better by imposing more standardized tests and more rote learning. Instead, we believe that it is in our nation's best interest to create an educational climate that nurtures risk-taking and creativity in teachers and students and that by doing this we will encourage critical independent thinkers who are able to invent new ways to face twenty-first-century challenges.

KATE WINTROL: PERSPECTIVES ON THE WESTERN EXPERIENCE I (HON 110)

When I first taught the honors survey class Perspectives on the Western Experience I, I replicated my educational experiences in graduate school by using a lecture format, the most traditional approach for a history class. My choice for a research assignment was conventional as well, asking students to write ten pages on a subject of their choice and include a minimum number of scholarly sources. The results of this generic assignment were banal and unimaginative; most read like a bad encyclopedia entry, containing an abundance of facts and little analysis. After attending a workshop on assignment design, I realized that this type of project was both too broad in content and too shallow in details. It did not challenge the students or encourage intellectual risk-taking but allowed them to stay inside the safe and familiar. The students knew this, too. Although class evaluations praised my energy and enthusiasm, they disagreed with the statement "The professor made me think."

During a break from teaching in 2008, I focused on other academic duties and thought about ways to revamp the course, especially the dreary assignment and the students' lack of intellectual stimulation. Ideally, students should critically question accounts of history, realize the possibility that the past is "constructed," and recognize the role that chance, literacy, and power play in the writing and visualization of history. In his post-modernist approach, Keith Jenkins maintains that "history is bound to be problematic because it is a contested term/discourse, meaning different things to different groups" (18). While giving lectures filled with interesting anecdotes, I had focused on the standard version of western civilization, not encouraging the students to think beyond the narrative or critically examine the issues. I also realized that, however entertaining and skillful I was as a presenter, descriptive histories were not sufficiently challenging to students. Both the assignment and the structure of the class had to change.

As students enter a history class, they already have a preconceived view of the past, a view fostered and embellished by countless cultural forces. Perspectives on the Western Experience I covers history and culture from antiquity through the Reformation, and I wondered what images and mental pictures sprang into students' minds when they heard terms like Imperial Rome, ancient Sparta, or medieval knights. Popular culture—from Renaissance paintings to contemporary television shows and film adaptations—has long fashioned visual images of the ancient world as exotic yet approachable. The medium of film may make the most indelible impact: "The visual, mimetic quality of cinema provides us, erroneously, with a sense of having experienced the 'reality of the past'" (Morgan 4). The atmosphere of the dark theater, the power of moving images, and the skill of the actors contribute to our suspension of disbelief. Particularly in the United States, given its lack of ancient ruins, films provide the canvas or space in which the past is realized. To many students, films constitute historical reality.

I experienced the "reality of the past" when I first saw the movie *Spartacus* in high school. I remember how moved I was by Kirk Douglas's Spartacus, who valiantly claimed he longed to see a world without slavery, in which all men could be free. The real Spartacus was an auxiliary legionnaire who defected, was captured, became a gladiator, and then started the largest slave revolt in antiquity. Although Spartacus terrorized Rome for three years, he neither viewed himself as a slave, nor was he motivated by ideological dreams of a new world order. The lines from the movie are, in fact, anachronistic, expressing sentiments more likely in 1960s American culture than ancient Rome. As I studied the making of the 1960 film, I realized how pervasive the forces of culture and history were in the post-World War II era. As Pierre Sorlin theorized in his 1980 work *Film in History: Restaging the Past*, historical films "aim primarily at illuminating the way in which individuals and groups of people understand their own time" (3). My challenge was to craft an imaginative assignment using historical films that encouraged students to recognize this important point.

THE ASSIGNMENT 2009/2010

When I returned to the classroom, I took a gamble and tried a new approach to the research paper. I have long been interested in the idea of historical representation in popular films. Pedagogically, I hoped that by asking the students to analyze presentations of historical events in movies, they would become aware of the uses and misuses of history as well as critically evaluate the concept of representation. Drawing on the recent scholarship in creativity studies, research on films and history, and conversations with numerous colleagues, I reworked my honors assignment. I asked students to analyze the portrayal of the past in popular cinema, either an imagined past such as *Clash of the Titans*, *King Arthur*, or *Robin Hood*, or actual events such as those portrayed in *300*, *Spartacus*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and *Cleopatra*.

Students either selected from a list of films I supplied or they suggested an alternate movie. The only requirement was that the film be a commercial product and depict events within the time period of the class. The choices were fairly predictable—*300*, *Passion of the Christ*, and *Gladiator* are always popular—but several students chose interesting films like the 1956 Ingmar Bergman film *Seventh Seal* or the silent version of *Passion of Joan of Arc*. Another student compared *Kingdom of Heaven* with the 1963 movie *Saladin* by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine. Keeping in mind the focus on flexibility emphasized by writers Ruth Dineen and Weihua Niu, I also allowed students to choose films not strictly on a historical subject, such as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: the Lightning Thief*, or those with dreadful and dubious versions of the past, such as *The Other Boleyn Girl*. I wanted the students to be invested in the assignment and to formulate and express their opinions. Students were encouraged to use the first-person point of view in their papers.

In terms of analysis, originally I had only asked students if their movie represented the past or depicted the values of today. I naively assumed that with copious amounts of text and theoretical discussions of films and history, students would be able to apply the larger concepts to their individual films. However, as I soon discovered, the assignment mistakenly assumed that students possessed critical thinking skills ready to be tapped just by directing them “to analyze.”

CHALLENGES IN DESIGN 2009/2010

Despite the popularity and accessibility of movies as well as students’ familiarity with them, the assignment proved challenging both logistically and theoretically. The initial problem was one of design: the assignment combined the intellectual idea of historical representation with practical instructions for locating sources. Despite my detailed directions, students often found searching for library resources a challenge and either chose general Internet sources or simply asked for assistance. Knowing that newspaper reviews for older films can be difficult to locate and that some film journals are a little esoteric, I collected a vast amount of research on the subject, my background as both an historian and a librarian fueling the compilation.

A comment by one student, however, provided me with a Eureka moment. After thanking me profusely for locating pertinent information, the student told me, “I wouldn’t have had any idea how to find this by myself.” I realized that my willingness to help students find sources prevented them from learning the research process, developing critical thinking skills, and employing creative reflection about the types of sources they would need. I had to learn how to control my urge to give books and articles to the students. After all, as a teaching librarian, I emphasize a long-term learning objective of teaching information literacy, a skill that students need throughout their college years and adult lives. In survey classes, students should get their first exposure to research skills, and I had failed in this respect.

THEORETICAL CHALLENGES 2009/2010

Perhaps the most difficult and ambitious aspect of the assignment for students to grasp was the concept of historical representation. How do we remember and memorialize the past? Rewriting the past is a time-honored tradition. From the grand vision of Augustus Caesar to petty, modern-day obsessions such as the removal of cigarettes from historical photographs, a desire to align past events to present values dominates. Helping honors students recognize this realignment is one of the most important outcomes of the assignment. However, the idea of historical representation was new to them, and many students were baffled, unsure where to start. I thought my detailed description of the assignment and a few supplemental readings would make the concept breathtakingly clear.

As it turned out, the original assignment was neither well-articulated nor obvious. The students simply researched the film—background, source material, and critical response—without ever tackling the idea of historical representation. Class evaluations reflected their confusion, including comments like “Not sure what she wanted in the paper,” “Not sure what I was supposed to look for,” and “Not sure how to write it.” Contributing to the confusion and perhaps resistance was the fact that a majority of students in the UNLV Honors College major in biology or engineering. Beginning science students often feel that accuracy and not analysis is the key to success, so students tended to point out the historically inaccurate sections of their film.

Indicating historical errors is part of analysis but not the main focus. For example, a very dedicated and serious student who wrote on *Braveheart* provided detailed descriptions of two major battles and the mistakes in the film version. He used a variety of historical sources on Scottish and military history but did not explore the underlying themes in the film. I got a blank and panicked stare when I asked, “Why did Mel Gibson choose to make this movie? Does altering the sequence of the battles change the theme of the movie? How was Scottish nationalism portrayed?” The student had not raised these questions and, more disturbingly, had never even considered asking them. I had asked him to analyze, but he had examined and researched the major battles; in his perception, that was analysis. Obviously, simply telling bright and focused honors students to analyze did not provoke critical questions. Something was missing.

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum, students’ vivid imaginations sometimes create sinister agendas in films that are far-fetched. Films can stray from historical reality simply for dramatic or aesthetic effect. One point I emphasize to students is that films are commercial enterprises designed to make money; they are entertainment for mass audiences, not for solemn museum showings. The events in the life of a historical character are altered, shortened, or exaggerated to create an engrossing film experience, as in Shekhar Kapur’s 1998 film *Elizabeth*. Although the film follows the basic biographical

narrative of Queen Elizabeth, the monarch's forty-five-year reign is compressed into a five-year period to ensure a two-and-a-half-hour running time.

Sometimes the sequence of events is modified for dramatic effect. For example, in the film *Chariots of Fire* depicting the 1924 Olympics, the main character, Harold Abrahams, won his final race, the 100-meter, in dramatic fashion after earlier losing in the 200-meter event. In reality, Abrahams won the 100-meter race first and lost his final event, the 200-meter, but it is more exhilarating for the audience to end the film watching Abrahams win. Sometimes, however, one can only assume gross ignorance on the part of filmmakers. A classic example is the 1963 film *Cleopatra*; the Egyptian queen enters Rome through the Arch of Constantine, a structure built about three hundred years later. By encouraging students to explore and analyze such historical inaccuracies, I am asking them, as Czikszenmihalyi says, "to learn how to relate and apply past ways of knowing to a constantly changing kaleidoscope of ideas and events" (xix).

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS REDESIGN 2011/2012

The challenges I faced in 2009/2010 were design flaws in the assignment itself, but a deeper issue was more complex, compelling me to examine the assignment in the context of class design. Discussions with a UNLV Libraries instructional designer led me to create clear learning objectives that, along with Paul Weinsten's article in *The History Teacher*, influenced the way I revised the assignment.

To rectify the vagueness of the research project, I divided it into two parts, one devoted to film analysis and another, which was due early in the semester, centered on locating scholarly resources. The assignment on research resources started students thinking about the film project and required exploration of the library's collections. I guided them to certain resources, but they had to go through the search process on their own. With support, students were able to discover valuable material from a wide variety of sources like *Archaeology Magazine* and the online journal *Screening the Past*.

The overall goal of the assignment was for students to convey the uncertainty of the past and the uses and abuses of it. If films are adapted, reworked, and modified for a contemporary audience, can adaptations of historical events even be possible? As Herbert Butterfield states, "The truth of history is no simple matter, all packed and parceled ready for handling in the marketplace. And the understanding of the past is not as easy as it is sometimes made to appear" (132). I wanted students to question the interpretation of the facts they read, not just memorize them. By asking students to critically examine historical films, I was asking them to engage in an "intellectually disciplined process," a non-intuitive skill developed and nurtured in an educational setting (Mulnix 465). Yet my class structure had focused on a standard, albeit entertaining, narrative of ancient and medieval history that did not encourage critical analysis of historiography or recognition of the incompleteness of historical records.

Although students are excited at the prospect of writing about films, they approach it with a simplistic methodology: “Here is what historians say about the past, and here is how the film portrayed it.” To complete the research project successfully, students must peel away the layers to look at films as cultural artifacts and must articulate how an historical film interprets the values and attitudes of the present. As they advance through the assignment, students must also tackle one of the most vexing problems of history: how to determine the truth about the past, a truth often more flexible than they imagine. Butterfield argues, “History is all things to all men. She is at the service of good causes and bad. In other words, she is a harlot and hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most” (131).

In the revised assignment, I briefly articulated specific subjects to examine. Students then needed to ask questions that involved analysis. Aside from discovering how their film deviated from its historical reality, students had to explain how the film was adapted to accommodate a modern audience. To help students look for subtlety, bias, and point of view, I emphasized finding information about the director and screenwriter. Through reading interviews with writers and directors, for instance, students were to examine the incentive or inspiration to use a historical situation as source material for popular entertainment.

In class discussions as well as individual meetings, I asked students about the aesthetic feel of the film. I encouraged them to question how fully the film aimed at accuracy in costumes, speech, character development, and cultural landscape. Students also considered whether lighting, scenery and camera shots enhanced the theme. As reference points throughout the semester, I presented images of art, sculpture, and paintings along with modern representations of historical figures like Cleopatra.

Examining historical figures and their representations is often the most straightforward project for students. Famous women like Cleopatra or Queen Elizabeth, for instance, typically have more feminist traits in contemporary versions than in films made seventy years ago. In exploring films set in the Middle Ages, I ask students to watch for depictions of clergy, almost universally shown as deceptive, evil, superstitious, and greedy. Portrayals of the lower classes, slaves, servants, or peasants are similarly problematic.

NEW READINGS 2011/2012

Practical changes in the assignment, along with individual meetings, aided the students’ success, but their approach to the paper and to the class itself still lacked adequate critical analysis. No amount of fine-tuning the assignment rectified this problem. I needed to manage the class differently and change my teaching style. Pedagogical research has shown that students have different learning styles and that lecture alone is not adequate for all students (Donovan & Bransford 12). I realized that to some degree I was still fulfilling my own love of performance and not stimulating young minds. Along with a new assignment

design, I scaled back to mini-lectures and placed more emphasis on discussion. Class readings included not only a brief textbook but rigorous, challenging, and often amusing primary documents. Much to my delight, students began to take a more critical view of historical representation, which I reinforced through discussion of primary documents, especially the works of Latin authors.

Roman writers, in particular, are suited for such dialog. From the time of Cato the Elder in the second century BCE to the end of their empire, Roman writers bemoaned the loss of hard-working, dutiful, virtuous citizens, who had been transformed by wealth into extravagant, dissolute, immoral characters who no longer tilled the fields. Conquest brought the Romans riches, power, and glory but proved a double-edged sword. The noble Roman farmer had become a luxury-loving spendthrift, and society changed in turn. Roman writers responded with a sense of nostalgia and longing. For example, Cato the Elder, terrified of the influence of effete Greeks with dangerous ideas, expelled Athenian philosophers from Rome and educated his son himself. Seneca repeatedly wrote about the hazards of wealth, using exaggerated and fabricated examples of Roman virtue to inspire citizens. Livy wrote a massive history of Rome, emphasizing men like Cincinnatus, who saved Rome from attack and then returned to cultivate his three-acre farm.

What all these authors have in common is either an attempt to justify present actions by paying homage to one's ancestors or a deep sense of loss and nostalgia for a bucolic way of life. Through class discussions, students recognized these writers longed for an imagined world, a past that never quite existed. The writer Sallust discussed the chaotic political situation in Rome during the late Republic by drawing an example from the idyllic age:

Accordingly, good morals were cultivated at home and in the fields in the early Republic. There was the greatest harmony and little or no avarice, justice and probity prevailed among them. . . . Hence a lust for money first, then for power grew upon them and these were the root of all evils. For avarice destroyed honor, integrity, and all other noble qualities; taught in their place insolence, cruelty, to neglect the gods, to set a prince on everything. . . . Finally, when the disease had spread like a deadly plague, the state was changed and a government second to none in quality became cruel and intolerable. (IX–X *The War with Catiline*)

This image of the ideal noble Roman has been a potent symbol throughout western culture. For instance, the French neoclassical painter Jacques Louis David used figures from early Rome to express the French yearning for liberty and revolution. After the Revolutionary War, early biographers referred to George Washington as the “American Cincinnatus” (Wills). This embellished vision continues to be a reference point for an idyllic past that reflects the desires and hopes of not only the ancient Romans but all societies facing change in culture and society.

STUDENT IMPROVEMENT 2011/2012

By using a new class format and a well-defined assignment, student papers showed increasingly sophisticated critical thinking skills. The following excerpts provide examples of student analysis of the concept of representation in popular films.

- **King Arthur**—"Guinevere has been portrayed as many things in previous Arthurian cinema; shrinking violet, a woman given to her desire, sometimes even a devious manipulator—but never before has she been shown to pick up a weapon and start taking down men twice her size. This aspect of the movie is an appeal to a post-modern audience who favor the theme of female empowerment."
- **Hercules**—"In short, Disney creates new myths and teaches its own messages to the young. Myths were not merely stories to the ancient Greeks, but had life lessons engrained within them. It seems as if Disney has a history of propagating whitewashed, bleached, diluted versions of myths and history. After all, Walt Disney's approach to the past was not to reproduce it, but to improve it. In other words, according to Disney, the past is malleable and events can be embellished upon, added entirely, watered down or cut off completely."
- **Spartacus**—"Symbols of oppression from the then current McCarthyism Era were intentionally placed into scenes of the movie *Spartacus* in order to create a message for the audience. This led to the modification, creation and deletion of actual events that took place during the third Servile War. Also, to appeal to the certification board, the producers of the film had to "Christianize" certain aspects of the film and have the audience presume Spartacus was a pre-Christian Christian."

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THE COURSE

Critical thinking is not intuitive; the spark must be lit in the classroom. If I want critical analysis from the students, then I have to design the course and the assignment to elicit it. The process is time-consuming and laborious, demanding creative risk-taking on my part. Every semester presents new challenges, but the results have certainly been rewarding. Students have moved out of their comfort zones and into unfamiliar territory, as revealed in a sample of their evaluations of the assignment:

- I liked the assignment—took something I was used to seeing, movies I grew up on. Assignment forces you to look at how themes of history are portrayed in a modern lens
- Realized that films are always presenting history from a modern perspective, the movie has to resonate with modern audiences.

- I learned a lot, it changed the way I look at movies, especially international conflicts. Gave me different perspectives. Now when I see movies set in the past, I wonder is that really what happened?
- I realize that movies as well as all visuals have hidden messages; there is more than what I'm presented with. I realized that even primary documents can have bias.

MARIA JERINIC: JANE AUSTEN, HER WORK AND OUR WORLDS (HONORS SEMINAR)

For years I have been telling my students they are all creative human beings, rehashing that cliché that creativity is the province not only of majors in the fine arts but of engineers and accountants too. However, I first began to think explicitly about encouraging and developing creativity with my assigned coursework in the spring of 2009. That semester, in response to student demand, I taught an honors seminar entitled "Jane Austen: Her Work and Our Worlds." From the moment I began to plan the course, I knew I would have to challenge my teaching habits. The enthusiasm and anticipation of the students was thrilling but daunting as I tried to imagine what these students from a range of majors expected to find on Austen's pages.

My field is English, but the 400-level honors seminars at UNLV are filled with students from a variety of disciplines. I always have a few English majors in my seminars, but they do not dominate. Consequently, class composition was foremost in my mind as I designed the Jane Austen course. I could not assume that students would know how to write an English research paper, I could not assume that such a project would be the most productive use of their energies, and I had no idea how invested they would be in work that seemed removed from many of their disciplines and personal as well as academic interests. Like many honors programs influenced by a liberal arts model, the UNLV Honors College encourages students to make connections, to consider how their work in different classes and different disciplines intersects. In order to encourage this process, I had to allow for some flexibility in course design and assignments.

To introduce some humor and assuage the fears of some hesitant paper writers, I decided, after a lengthy discussion with a colleague, that the capstone experience of the class would be a Regency ball held during finals week. Yes, there would be a final research project, but another significant class assignment would be a group presentation geared toward this ball. Students would create presentation groups based on what they felt they needed to know to attend such an event. They would create a list of topics (fashion, food, etiquette, pastimes, politics) and organize themselves into groups of three or four based on their interests. I provided them with research requirements about the quality and number of sources, and I gave them presentation guidelines, which required

that they use visual aids, speak for ten minutes each, and provide a group hand-out with a bibliography, summary of the presentation highlights, and one suggestion for our ball. I thought of this ball as my “creative move,” a way to show them that research does not always have to culminate in a research paper. What I did not expect was that the presentations themselves would become wildly creative, that the students would work to share their material in ways that moved beyond the traditional lecture-with-PowerPoint format. For example, the fashion group created a style and shopping guide that taught their peers to notice the traces of Regency style in contemporary fashion and provided suggestions for adapting clothes in the twenty-first-century closet to the conventions of an early-nineteenth-century ballroom. This group then set up a “clinic” in the hour before the ball, a place where the “guests” could stop by to receive finishing touches on their hairstyles and costumes.

The fashion group’s enthusiasm, apparent from the start of the semester, influenced the etiquette group’s presentation. The latter’s research revealed the preponderance of conduct books in the eighteenth century, so the students decided to replace the handout with their own “book” to share Austen-era manners. The politics group told me they were so inspired by their classmates’ presentations that at the last minute they decided to revise their straightforward handout and present their information as an eighteenth-century newspaper, one that would have been read in the coffeehouses of the day.

The desire to match the standards set by their peers, to perform beyond the academic requirements of the course, was not unusual that semester. The students surprised me with a website to showcase their presentations and to provide prospective ball attendees with a resource. They made a *Facebook* page so that they could continue their class conversations, swap Austen jokes, and share resources. Most of the students were eager to build and maintain a creative intellectual community, and this process informed their individual research projects. Perhaps I should not have been surprised. According to Dineen and Niu, “creativity will flourish within well-organized but flexible environments which allow for group and individual work” (par.7). Additionally, our classroom was an interdisciplinary environment; students of different majors brought their disciplinary methods, questions, and vocabulary to a traditional literary subject and then devised alternative ways to work with that subject. Students were eager to share their disciplinary expertise in order to generate varied responses to Austen.

A strain of the argument for developing creativity argues for such interdisciplinary work. For example, Csikszentmihalyi argues, “Schools teach how to answer, not to question. They teach isolated disciplines that, as the years pass, become more and more difficult to integrate” (xix). Jackson also discusses disciplinary differences as one possible roadblock in encouraging creativity. For some teachers “creativity only has meaning when it is directly associated with the practices and forms of intellectual engagement in their discipline” (4). Relaxing disciplinary boundaries can be an administrative nightmare, but in the

classroom the possibilities are exciting. That first semester, I certainly saw how the meeting of the disciplines generated ideas.

During that first semester, when I would discuss my students' energy and projects, my colleagues commented on my creative teaching methods. I felt I deserved no credit, having simply stumbled on conditions that allowed my students to engage with material in ways I had never seen before. As I prepared to teach the next semester, I was determined to identify the conditions that had encouraged all this creativity. I had seen that encouraging or at least allowing for creativity stimulated students to learn, to take risks, to produce new knowledge. Consequently I wanted to know how intentionally to foster this creativity in the classroom.

I knew that replicating the fervor of that first semester was unlikely. I have taught the class twice since that spring of 2009, and both semesters have been different from that first one and from each another. Students in one class were hesitant to deviate from traditional academic presentation and paper formats. Students in the other enjoyed the opportunity to do something different for their final projects but were hesitant to embrace the ball. Finding costumes made them uncomfortable; they had to be coaxed into dancing by the one or two Regency dance enthusiasts. As teachers, we know that no two classes are ever quite the same. So much depends on class composition, the combination of personalities, and the classroom dynamics. So much can depend on the teacher, too, and in the more frustrating moments of the second semester, I frequently wondered what I was doing wrong.

Ultimately, my reaction to that quieter second semester forced me to consider what I really wanted to encourage my students to do. The exuberance of that first semester was intoxicating, but it threatened to blind me to the quieter and more individual displays of creativity that appeared in all three semesters. Reflection and reading about creativity within academia helped me identify my pedagogical goal: to encourage students to build on their own interests and scholarly practices in order to forge creative connections between disciplines and generate new knowledge. I want them to work in ways they have not done before. I want them to consider how their own passions could inform their academic and professional work. First, however, they have to know what their passions are. Csikszentmihalyi argues that, "if one wishes to inject creativity in the educational system, the first step might be to help students find out what they truly love, and help them to immerse themselves in the domain—be it poetry or physics, engineering or dance. If young people become involved with what they enjoy, the foundations for creativity will be in place" ("Foreword" xix–xx). What I hope for now is that, once students are able to identify their interests and learn to take them seriously, they can bring their enthusiasm for certain disciplines to illuminate others, to help them develop an appreciation for other kinds of work and knowledge.

Before the third semester, I redesigned assignments. Because of student interest in the *Facebook* and web pages, I replaced the weekly reading journal

(written in a notebook) with a biweekly blog via our online campus course management system. A disadvantage was that the new requirements took away some of the space for student initiative of that first exciting semester, when one student had told me it was easy to think “outside the box” about her presentation because I gave some guidelines, but not too many. I worried that by requiring students to blog, they would worry more about fulfilling the assignment and think less about how to use their blogs in unusual ways. Blogging, however, did force them to put down their ideas and respond to their classmates’ and my posts; as a result, we were able to highlight offhand but rich connections between Austen and, say, Jung or the America Reads Program or Monty Python, connections that gave students ideas for their final projects.

Over the course of this third semester, I came to appreciate how the blogging process lends itself to the development of creativity. John Cowan points out that “[f]or many of us, the heart of the creative process is often the sudden insight or idea” (157). Over the years I have found that students have many such moments without recognizing them. I had assigned journals for many semesters, but the piles of pages often inhibited me from reading them closely and regularly. I had thought of a journal as a tool for students, a record of their thoughts as they worked through problems while developing their writing muscles, yet I was bothered by the nagging realization that these records would be less helpful to students who had not yet learned to recognize and develop the flashes of inspiration scattered across the page. Blogging, with its possibilities for a quick read and response, allowed me to respond immediately and highlight fascinating points in either a blog comment or an email message, and it also allowed fellow students to encourage each other and identify lines of thought I had not noticed. Through blogging, our class members were able to point out exciting and creative ideas generated by individual students, including those who did not see themselves as creative, and this in turn helped push some of the more cautious students toward trusting their sources of inspiration.

In the third semester, I also kept the group presentation from the first semester. One hope I had for this assignment was that students would design groups based on topics that reflected their personal interests, and in some cases they did. Students who cared passionately about art, dancing, politics, or economics chose to create presentation groups around these themes. Some then built on the ideas generated by this assignment to develop their final projects.

I also kept the final project, but I allowed another option. In the first semester, I had assigned a final research project that relied on a thesis-based paper even though it asked students to push the boundaries of academic writing. The results had been exciting. One math major wrote an analysis of Darcy’s contemporary popularity in the form of a math proof. A biology major wrote an essay on Austen and venereal disease, and a psychology major played with voice, adopting a colloquial tone for her argument that Austen provided contemporary daters with credible advice, a claim she supported with solid scholarly research.

Still, in the third semester, I wanted to encourage students not to rely on the paper option but instead to draw on alternative forms and then create products informed by research. I had devised a similar assignment for a final project in a class I taught on the contemporary relevance of Victorian literature, for which I received a video game titled *The Governess*, heavy metal revisions of Victorian songs, a neoVictorian photoshoot, and paintings inspired by Victorian ideas about art, all accompanied by “artist statements,” short essays that drew on scholarly research. I decided to allow the Austen students similar freedoms. While the majority of students chose the paper-based project—producing, for example, a Jane Austen dating guide for men or a short story that responded to *Northanger Abbey’s* use of the Gothic—two students, who were fascinated by YouTube fan enthusiasm for Austen, created their own videos. One student, inspired by the mashup *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, wrote a song “mashing” *Pride and Prejudice’s* themes and plot details with a contemporary melody. Both students submitted artist statements that explored how their projects responded to Austen’s themes and forms.

One drawback of my emphasis on alternative forms and/or products was that students who elected to write more “traditional” papers worried that they were not creative, that they had taken a safe route. My emphasis on product had the effect of shaming students who wished to write a research paper because it would allow them to investigate ideas that fascinated them. “It’s not a very creative idea,” a number of them said apologetically. I was delighted that my students were thinking of themselves as creative beings, and, while I wanted them to take risks (some were clearly afraid to do so), I did not want students to ignore the creative potential for work in traditional scholarly forms. I felt it was both creative and risk-taking for the kinesiology major to think about the tension between Enlightenment and Romantic ideals in an Austen novel, and writing this paper enthralled the student; she was surprised to have noticed this tension and was eager to share her ideas. Another student, a psychology major who spent much of the semester thinking about the “dumb” characters and worrying that her ideas were not creative enough, produced a sophisticated analysis of Austen’s treatment of self-reflection.

These papers provided intellectual epiphanies for the students involved and reminded me to reemphasize to my students that defining creativity is notoriously difficult because it manifests itself in many ways. When we talk about creativity, we might refer to unusual connections forged between ideas, or we might adopt the Israeli notion of “the relationship of creativity to real-world problem solving” (Sternberg 5) or the Indian concept that “creativity is the result of doing something original or novel that is also useful” (Sternberg 8). Take the student who apologized for focusing on “just a paper”: her argument was creative by drawing on her work-study job at a preschool and her readings of Austen to argue for a revision of the America Reads Program.

My focus on product highlights another problem, though: how to assess creativity. I am comfortable with grading academic papers; I know an A, B, C,

and F when I see them. I feel less comfortable grading a presentation or painting or piece of music, much less evaluating and comparing the student who designs a video game with the one who bakes a Victorian wedding cake or who writes a paper arguing for the influence of Victorian medical science on *Jane Eyre*.

In our assessment culture, escaping the emphasis on final products is hard. According to Cowan, a problem with creativity and assessment is that “creativity . . . tends to be judged, within society, in terms of products that are seen to be creative and are rated as commendable for that reason. Yet often it is in the experiences of failure and frustration that the creative ability is honed and developed” (158). In terms of this argument, my awareness that I am not always qualified to judge whether a product is a success or failure is not a weakness. Perhaps then I could consider the arguments of Dineen and Niu, who advocate a creative pedagogy with an assessment tool that has “[a] focus on process rather than outcome” (par.7); students should be evaluated “with a focus on experimentation and the creative process” (par. 16), and the “central assessment criterion is creative development, evidenced by the student willingness to experiment and their openness to new ways of working” (par.17).

In imagining how I might emphasize a process approach in my course, I have considered devoting class sessions to student presentations of project proposals, allowing peers to help students define their projects. As a class, we could make democratic decisions to ensure that projects are equal in terms of workload and rigor. I could then provide the class members with peer response sheets designed to guide student evaluators and allow for unanticipated responses and suggestions. I could then collect and compile the comments, which I would then distribute to the relevant student. This presentation and peer evaluation process could be valuable, but might be more appropriate for a workshop or research methods seminar. In a content-driven class, this process might cut out class time needed to discuss the readings and ideas that form the basis of the course and to provide the project inspiration in the first place. One needs to know a subject well in order to respond creatively, so cutting the time devoted to developing that knowledge might be irresponsible.

I finally decided to rely on the proposal and artist statement that accompanied each creative project. I used proposals to compare projects, and then I graded students on whether they had lived up to the expectations they established in their proposals. This way, I could ensure that students took on work of somewhat equitable rigor, and, if I thought a project seemed too thin or vague, I had the student rewrite. Once the project was finished, I used the proposals to consider if students had lived up to their own standards. I also graded the artist statements rigorously as academic papers, looking for a thesis and integrated research. To some extent, this approach to both proposals and artist statements allowed me to embrace Dineen and Niu’s emphasis on process in that I allowed students to write/create “drafts” of the projects and statements as well as the proposals although not all students took full advantage of this

opportunity. Still, I am not entirely satisfied with my focus on the proposals and papers; I worry that it reveals my own lack of risk-taking. Perhaps we all respond to increasing demands for assessment by falling back on familiar practices. One challenge for teachers lies in exploring how to use the current culture of assessment to boost our creativity and to confront the ways our teaching methods might inhibit the very creativity we say we want.

I also rethought my rubric for the presentation because I felt less confident as a grader of presentations and was more willing to question and challenge my current methods. As I struggled to develop appropriate rigor and as I read and thought about creativity and its role in education, I realized that the rubric I had so carefully devised through research and consultation did not reflect what I actually valued and appreciated in my students' work. My rubric emphasized group organization, eye contact, confidence, and respect for fellow participants during the actual presentation; all are important elements, but I was emphasizing them at the expense of focusing on the creative presentation of their scholarship. I wanted my students to conduct rigorous research together to prepare for their presentations, and I wanted their visuals to be appropriately documented and edited, but I also wanted students to consider how to engage their audience. Jackson helped me understand why these goals were worth pursuing: "students will become more effective learners and, ultimately, successful people if they can recognize and harness their own creative abilities and combine them with more traditional academic abilities" (1). I realized I had been looking for the traditional ability to cite and edit, but I also admired a bingo game that kept students alert and an eighteenth-century newspaper handout, and my rubric contained no way for me to document this creativity or to guide my students toward it. In my revision, I clarified that, in the context of our North American classroom, I would look for a presentation of information that somehow deviated from the traditional speaker lecturing off of a PowerPoint slide and distributing a straightforward bulleted handout. Students could use these formats, but I wanted them to consider at least one way they could vary or deviate from them.

CONCLUSION

We teach and write in a spirit of exploration and development. We are not entirely satisfied with our revisions and our process, but we also believe that our dissatisfaction drives and improves our teaching. While in the throes of our struggle to help our students, we know that our effort is not just about them. As Jackson points out, teachers satisfy some of their own "unfulfilled needs" when they "work in different ways with students" and explore new outcomes and conversations (5). As much as we work to help and teach our students, they do the same for us, which is one reason our work is a calling and not just a job.

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